

In the Claims:

Please amend pending Claim 13, cancel previously presented Claim 24, and add new Claim 26, as shown in the Listing of Claims below, which is a complete listing of all Claims ever presented and replaces all prior versions, and listings, of the Claims in the instant Application.

Listing of Claims

1-12. (Canceled)

13. (Currently amended) A countercurrent process for the continuous esterification of C₁₋₂₂ fatty acids with C₁₋₁₀ monoalkanols, C₂₋₅ di- or trialkanols or mixtures thereof, said process comprising

- (a) partially reacting the fatty acids and alkanols in a preliminary reactor in the liquid phase in the presence of ~~an~~ a heterogeneous catalyst selected from the group consisting of organic or inorganic, basic or acidic, anion or cation exchangers, acid clays and zeolites,
- (b) passing the partially-reacted reaction mixture to a separation unit,
- (c) removing water from the partially-reacted reaction mixture in the separation unit,
- (d) passing the resulting de-watered, partially-reacted reaction mixture to a countercurrent reaction column,
- (e) further reacting the fatty acids and alkanols in the countercurrent reaction column in the liquid phase in the presence of heterogeneous catalysts, and
- (f) removing the crude product from the bottom of the reaction column.

14. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 13, further comprising increasing the vapour load in the lower part of the reaction column by feeding nitrogen into the reaction column at the lowermost plate.

15. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 13, wherein the preliminary reactor is a fixed-bed reactor.

16. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 13, wherein the esterification reaction is carried out at temperatures of 50 to 200°C.

17. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 16, wherein the esterification reaction is carried out at temperatures of 80 to 150°C.

18. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 13, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₁₋₁₀ monoalkanols.

19. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 18, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₁₋₈ monoalkanols.

20. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 18, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with isopropanol or 2-ethylhexanol.

21. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 13, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₂₋₅ di- or trialkanols.

22. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 21, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₂₋₃ di- or trialkanols.

23. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 21, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with glycerol.

24. (Canceled)

25. (Previously presented) A process according to claim 13, wherein acidic cation exchangers are used as the catalyst.

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26. (New) The process according to claim 13, wherein the heterogeneous catalyst is selected from specially worked-up bleaching earths and catalysts based on transition metals.